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Indonesia: Present State of Dissidence

President Suharto's New Year's address reflected the significant degree of attention his government has given to domestic dissent. Suharto referred to recent student demonstrations on Java as a threat to national stability, although persistent guerrilla movements outside of Java undoubtedly concern him also. The President stated that last month's release of 10,000 political detainees would not threaten the nation's security, however, and pledged to continue the scheduled release or trial of the remaining detainees who now number approximately 21,000. Suharto's generally moderate tone toward opposition to his regime and the emphasis on the government's commitment to equitable distribution of development benefits are probably designed to quiet his critics pending his expected reelection this March.

Suharto and his family have been the subject of much criticism. The most recent accusation which surfaced in the highly publicized Sawito political trial alleged that Mrs. Suharto was involved in smuggling activities. Suharto's response to these and other attacks has been relatively restrained, despite the advice of some military officials that he adopt tougher measures. His government has neither closed to the public nor inhibited the press from reporting on the Sawito trial; it has arrested students, but released them quickly; and although it has harassed notable critics such as retired General Nasution and former Vice President Hatta, it has never detained them. This moderation probably stems from Suharto's belief that harsh measures would only stiffen opposition at home and diminish the government's recent gains in its human rights record abroad, both of which Suharto wants to prevent as he prepares for his reelection.

The President nonetheless professed concern in his speech that the student protests in Jakarta, Bandung, and Jogjakarta could damage Indonesia's continued political and social development. Suharto said that the military's warning of 15 December, in which it promised to take firm

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action against elements undermining the authority of national leadership, was issued to prevent heightened tension in the future. This warning, and a later admonition to students to refrain from taking to the streets, appears to have met with at least temporary success. Students have lately confined their activities to quiet discussions of issues on campus and reasonably polite meetings with government officials. However, the recent detention of a well-known university professor for criticism of the government could spark fresh outbreaks of student demonstrations.

Suharto has had a more difficult time subduing dissidence outside of Java. In East Timor, the Revolutionary Movement for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) continues to mount effective resistance against the better equipped and more numerous Indonesians. In a very candid statement to the US Ambassador, the General responsible for the Timor operations conceded that the Army lacks adequate manpower, supplies, and expertise to root out a guerrilla force now estimated at about 600. Nonetheless, Suharto's extension of amnesty to those who will side with the government--an appeal aimed more at villagers probably aiding FRETILIN than the guerrillas themselves--and increased food and clothing supplies to the villagers will probably hamper operations of FRETILIN.

In North Sumatra, members of the fanatic Muslim National Liberation Front for Aceh (NFLA) shot two Americans at the US-owned Mobil gas site last November and has promised to continue attacking foreigners employed by overseas corporations. The NFLA's actions are ultimately aimed at the Javanese, who are resented for exploiting Sumatra's wealth in natural resources for Java's benefit. By frightening off foreign investment, the NFLFA hopes to deprive the Suharto government of important development funds. Although Jakarta has increased security forces there, while being careful not to send too many Javanese soldiers, the still limited forces and the forested terrain work against complete suppression of NFLFA terrorism.

In Irian Jaya, the Organization for Papuan Independence (OPM) continues to harass Indonesian soldiers and cultivate latent anti-Indonesian sentiment among villagers. The OPM successfully sabotaged the US-owned Freeport

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Minerals copper mine last summer, and has threatened kidnappings and hijackings. Suharto's success in neutralizing the OPM will depend on the government's ability to gain the support of village tribes and maintain friendly relations with Papua New Guinea in order to limit the OPM's use of that country as a sanctuary.

Suharto's assertion that the overall security situation is under control and his apparently genuine desire to ease the detainee problem suggests that the schedule for future releases might be accelerated. He undoubtedly hopes that such a move would dampen criticism at home and enhance Indonesia's human rights record abroad, although skepticism exists among many Indonesian officials disappointed over the lack of praise the Western press has accorded the government for the December release. If security worsens, and this is possible given the volatility of the students and the militancy of devout Muslims angered over the government's attempt to recognize mysticism as an official religion, then Suharto could delay further releases.

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